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ABSTRACT

Under the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) is the provision that creates school councils and delegates to them the authority to make important educational decisions to improve student performance. This paper describes findings from the third year of a 5-year study of SBDM that focused on early examples of connections between council decision making and changes in curriculum and instruction. Data were derived from interviews in 13 schools in 9 Kentucky districts as well as several statewide data sources. Findings indicate that more schools are establishing councils, although the rate of increase has slowed, and that councils are tackling more complex issues. Most council decisions continue to have a nonacademic focus. Parent involvement in councils was limited and instructional changes were visible. Features of councils that are effectively involved in decisions about curriculum and instruction are identified. However, councils will continue to face the following challenges: understanding new expectations, blending traditional with new approaches, and debating differences constructively. For councils to continue to evolve, they need strong site leadership, instructional guidance, opportunities and time to learn, and survival skills for making the transition. One table and a map of regional service centers are included. (LMI)

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SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING: LINKING DECISIONS TO LEARNING

Third-Year Report to The Prichard Committee

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August 1994

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SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING: LINKING DECISIONS TO LEARNING

Third-Year Report to The Prichard Committee

Jane L. David
Bay Area Research Group
August 1994

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Under the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) is the provision that creates school councils and delegates to them the authority to make important educational decisions to increase student performance. Although KERA is still evolving, including important components of curricular guidance and assessment, the third year of this five-year study of SBDM focused on early examples of connections between council decision making and changes in curriculum and instruction. This year's main emphasis was to understand how and to what extent SBDM can contribute to KERA's ultimate goal of transforming curriculum and instruction in ways that increase student performance. This report is based on interviews in thirteen schools and nine districts as well as several statewide data sources.

- **Progress continues.** More schools are establishing councils, although the rate of increase has slowed, and councils are tackling more complex issues.

- **Focus still non-academic.** Most council decisions still focus on issues of student discipline, extracurricular activities, and facilities. These are issues that parents and educators deeply care about, and believe they can solve.

- **Limited parent involvement.** Parents running for council positions, voting in elections, and sitting on committees are still small in number and in voice.

- **Visible instructional changes.** Many instructional changes inside schools are visible and clearly traceable to KERA. Teachers are asking students to write more, to explain their answers orally and in writing, to work in teams, and to perform tasks similar to those in KIRIS, the new assessment system.

Instructional changes may result either from council actions or from leadership and access to professional development, without direct council involvement. Councils effectively involved in decisions about curriculum and instruction share several features:

- Leadership that focuses attention on student learning.
- A role of setting policy, coordinating, and approving recommendations.
- A dynamic and interconnected committee structure.
- A communication network inside and outside the school.
- Strong parent representation on committees.
- Access to new knowledge and professional development.

Even when councils have these features in place, changing traditional classroom practice faces challenges which simply take time to overcome.

- **Understanding new expectations**. Teachers struggle to understand what they are expected to do, and how to tell if it is working. Parents struggle even more to understand what it means when grades, textbooks, workbooks, and tests--the familiar tools of the trade--seem to disappear.

- **Blending the new with the old**. Few ways exist for teachers and parents to learn how to blend what worked well in the past with new approaches reflecting up-to-date knowledge about teaching for understanding. District--and even state--administrators are not always able to help, since they too are learning new ways.

- **Debating differences constructively**. Importantly, the focus of most--although not the loudest--conversation about KERA is about best practice, not about personal values, and reflects genuine feelings of confusion and disagreement. These are complicated issues of real educational substance that have rarely been debated publicly in the past. No one believes that either basic skills or understanding and application is unimportant. Differences concern how and when skills and concepts are taught, and the results orientation of KERA allows for considerable variation.

Where the will exists, differences can be constructively accommodated, as long as the debate stays focused on substance. For councils to continue to evolve in the direction of setting policy and creating committee structures in support of sound educational decisions, schools and their communities need:

- **Strong site leadership** from educators trained to inspire people, not the products of traditional training in administration and building management.

- **Instructional guidance** that emphasizes appropriateness of different strategies for different purposes, blending the strengths of traditional schooling with new knowledge about teaching for understanding.

- **Opportunities and time to learn** for teachers, administrators, and parents, beyond a handful of days dedicated to professional development.

- **Survival skills for the transition,** including tolerance for uncertainty and confusion, and recognition of the time and opportunities needed for everyone to reach new understandings about effective teaching and learning.

A reform as ambitious as KERA clearly must be developmental and dynamic, with everyone learning along the way. Thus, the greatest threat to reaching its promise may be the pressure to judge results prematurely. School councils can play a constructive role by creating a climate in their school and community that supports ongoing learning, and by identifying where more information and knowledge are needed for their school staff and for the larger school community.

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PREFACE

This is the third annual report in a five-year study of progress in implementing School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) under the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). KERA creates a new education system, intended to dramatically increase the performance of all students and accompanied by a substantial increase in funding distributed more equitably across districts. Underlying this comprehensive legislative reform is the premise that those closest to the students (teachers, parents, and school administrators) should have the authority to make school-level policy decisions, in exchange for assuming responsibility for student performance measured by a new assessment system .

School-Based Decision Making is KERA's vehicle for delegating authority to each school site. With certain exceptions, KERA requires all schools by 1996 to form councils composed of three teachers and two parents, elected by their constituencies, and the principal. Under SBDM, councils control many decisions about curriculum, staffing, and instruction, as well as discipline and extracurricular activities.

Together with accountability, SBDM forms the underpinning of a new education system designed to increase the performance of all students, guided by a set of challenging student learning outcomes. These learning outcomes convey a new vision of teaching and learning that emphasizes the need for students to understand concepts and apply new knowledge, not simply memorize facts and isolated skills.

To guide schools in transforming their curriculum and instruction, the rest of the system includes curriculum frameworks that communicate these goals, professional development in support of their implementation, a mandatory ungraded primary program, and a corresponding set of new assessment instruments that form the basis for accountability with consequences. The new assessments emphasize direct measures of performance and thinking, including portfolios and performance tasks.

Together with a range of additional supports, including on-site preschool and family resource centers, these components of KERA form an integrated vision of reform. This is the context in which SBDM must be viewed.

SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING: LINKING DECISIONS TO LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

This report marks the end of the third year of a five-year study of progress in implementing School-Based Decision Making under the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). The long-term goal of the research is to understand how SBDM connects to the rest of KERA and, specifically, how and to what extent SBDM contributes to the ultimate goal of transforming curriculum and instruction in ways that increase student performance.

At the outset of this five-year undertaking, it was clear that early judgments about progress in implementing SBDM had to be grounded in the extent to which the other elements of KERA were also being put in place. At the end of the third year, the complexity of implementing the many facets of KERA, from curricular guidance to feedback on assessment results, underscores the need for a long-term time frame. This need was acknowledged during the past year in both the Commissioner's recommendations for mid-course adjustments, which included a delay in applying sanctions to schools, and the results of the 1994 biennial legislative session which made only minor modifications to the law.

The 1994 legislative modifications directly related to SBDM respond to broadly shared concerns and do not change the authority of councils in any fundamental way. These changes include, among others, adding requirements for ensuring minority representation where needed and allowing any parent to vote in council elections, not only those belonging to dues paying organizations. School councils will now receive 65 percent of the professional development funds in their budget allocation. In addition, councils can choose to elect members to one- or two-year terms, but holders of two-year terms cannot serve consecutive terms. Councils must also establish policies to include parents, classified employees, and interested others on any committees they establish.

The past year saw the first release of assessment results measuring individual school progress and an increase in public discussion about KERA, including more vocal criticism and more vigorous support. The year also brought the passage of major federal legislation, The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which codifies national goals for education and a commitment to state systemic reform efforts mirroring many of the principles of KERA. For example, Goals 2000 emphasizes curriculum frameworks, new assessments, and decentralized decision making in addition to adding professional development and parent involvement to the national goals. One result will be an increase in national attention to Kentucky's experiences with KERA as other states pursue their own variants of systemic reform.

STUDY DESIGN

Against this backdrop, the third year's research focused on early examples of connections between site-based* council council decision making and changes in curriculum and instruction. Given the recency of assessment results and curricular guidance, councils would be just beginning to take on decisions about classroom practice during 1993-94. Expectations for curriculum and instruction are still under development. Although the state curriculum frameworks were released at the end of the 1992-93 year, they provide only general guidance. During the spring of 1994, the goals for student learning were rewritten to be clearer, and the Kentucky Department of Education is in the process of communicating more specific expectations through content standards, course outlines, and other guidelines for teachers.

Therefore, I purposely sought a sample of schools in the forefront of change reputed to have made some significant changes in classroom practices. I also focused on elementary and middle schools since high schools are generally slower to change and the high school restructuring initiative is just beginning. My goal was to understand the conditions under which councils attempt to influence classroom practices and how they organize to do so successfully.

I visited a sample of thirteen schools in nine districts across the state, reflecting different geographic areas and sizes. All but one were elementary or middle schools. I interviewed teachers, administrators, and parents and as well as some combination of school board members, superintendents, community members, and central office administrators in most of the districts.

To continue to capture a statewide picture of progress in implementing SBDM, I also looked at changes in the numbers of schools with councils, training opportunities, and changes in state policies. I interviewed staff in the Kentucky Department of Education, two Regional Service Centers, the Office of Education Accountability, as well as those who hear about SBDM issues from the field, including the Prichard Committee and the Kentucky Association of School Councils (KASC). In addition, I attended the second statewide conference of KASC and interviewed attendees. I also reviewed several hundred articles between July 1993 and June 1994 which mention SBDM from newspapers across Kentucky. These reflect a much larger sample across the state than the case study sites and provide another window into the kinds of issues councils are tackling.

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* "Site-based" is the commonly used term to refer to SBDM. I use "school-based" and "site-based" interchangeably in this report.

FINDINGS

Findings from the first two years of this study indicated widespread progress in establishing councils and creating the necessary policies and structures to become operational. However, the research also found that councils encountered an array of challenges in becoming effective decision making bodies, particularly with regard to issues of strengthening curriculum and instruction--the ultimate goal of KERA.

Consequently, the primary focus of this year's work was to identify schools with evidence of changes in classroom practices, to understand how and why some councils are able to take on these more complex and difficult issues. The findings below are organized under four topics, beginning with an update on council formation across the state. The second and most extensive topic is council decision making, focusing on examples of structures used by effective councils. The third topic concerns changes in classroom practices, and what helps and hinders those shifts while the fourth topic looks briefly at the role of the district in supporting council decision making.

Council Formation and Training

KERA requires all schools, with a few exceptions, to have councils by 1996. (Each district was required to have at least one school with a council in 1991). As of August 1994, approximately 60% of the schools across the state (769 of 1288*) had established site-based councils. This represents roughly a 10% increase since August 1993 when 660 schools had established councils. This is a smaller increase than hoped for by the Kentucky Department of Education which had set a goal of roughly 75% by June 1994.

The table below presents the percentage of schools with councils by service region. The percentages vary from 55% to 77%, with the exception of Jefferson County (Region 3), in which only 14% of the schools have established councils, reflecting a continuing struggle over the relationship between state mandates and the local collective bargaining agreement. Although the technical issues have been resolved through an agreement that gives councils the option to set aside parts of the contract with a two-thirds vote, less than fifteen percent of the schools have opted for councils. All but 15 of the state's 176 districts have more than the one required school council.

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* The Kentucky Department of Education has recalculated the number of schools statewide from 1362 to 1288 to reflect the total number of councils legally required; for example some K-8 or K-12 schools may legally have one council and hence should be considered one school for that purpose.

SCHOOLS WITH COUNCILS
BY REGION AS OF AUGUST 1994*

Region	Percentage of Schools with Site-Based Councils
1	66%
2	58%
3	14%
4	74%
5	75%
6	55%
7	66%
8	77%
Statewide	60%

* Source: Kentucky Department of Education. See Attachment A for map of geographical regions.

The opportunity to select a new principal is still the most frequently-cited reason for forming a site council, and it is certainly the most valued decision mentioned by those interviewed. Schools that do not choose to form a council include some in which faculty members are comfortable with their level of input into decision making, and some which are actively discouraged by central office administrators or by the principal. As 1996 draws closer sentiment also seems to be more widespread that there is little reason to take on a responsibility as time-consuming as SBDM until absolutely necessary.

Virtually all newly formed councils have access to introductory training, although members elected in subsequent years may not. Most training is reported to be adequate, and focuses on creating by-laws and policies and the rudiments of teamwork. As councils begin to take on more issues and as new members are elected, the members themselves see a need for the entire faculty--and more parents--to participate in training that describes what councils are and the role they are to play. For a council to function effectively, the entire school community needs a shared understanding of its purpose and role. Yet, without understanding the role of the council, it is doubtful that most faculties would place a high priority on such training and, if they did, whether the resources exist to offer training to the larger school community. There is also little access to additional training and development that moves councils beyond the introductory stage, although there seems to be more awareness of the need for it.

The number of parents running for council positions and voting in council elections is still quite small, with very little minority participation. The recent legislative changes regarding minority participation and parent elections will have some influence.

How to substantially increase parent involvement in any school activity besides sports remains a challenge. Some strategies are mentioned below, as are potential consequences of continued low levels of participation.

Council Decision Making

The schools visited in this year's study were selected particularly for their efforts to change classroom practices. Yet, even in these schools, most council decisions focus on issues of student discipline, extracurricular activities (sports and cheerleading), and facilities (buildings and grounds). Across the state, judging from newspaper coverage, these are far and away the issues that councils spend most time on. The fact is that these are issues that people care deeply about--and they present problems that both educators and parents feel knowledgable about and able to solve.

At the same time, newspaper reports of council actions during 1993-94 reflect considerably more involvement in issues of personnel, budget, scheduling, and other areas beyond discipline and facilities than in previous years. Councils are taking on a much broader range of topics and much more complex issues, such as redefining staff positions and restructuring the school day.

Schools are not alone in the lack of clear linkages between council actions and issues of teaching and learning. Inside the Kentucky Department of Education connections are just beginning to be forged between the office that deals most directly with SBDM and the offices that handle curriculum, professional development, and assessment. The more the Kentucky Department of Education and the Regional Service Centers continue to make these connections internally, the more likely are schools to see the connections.

There are several examples of school councils that have made significant decisions about curriculum, instructional practices, and school organization. In every case, it is a difficult and time consuming process, often frustrated by confusion over knowing what to do differently and how to tell if it is working. How these councils function and what stands in the way of more schools operating this way are described below.

Structures that work

Policy boards. Councils that operate effectively as vehicles for schoolwide change tend to operate like boards of directors that hear recommendations for changes and supporting evidence from committees, where the intensive information gathering and discussion occur. Committee members--parents, teachers, and other staff--gather information through calls and visits to other schools, surveys of faculty, and ongoing discussion with school staff and parents, in order to present well-supported recommendations to the council. For example, in one school the assessment committee identified weaknesses in writing; the curriculum committee recommended all teachers maintain writing portfolios; the professional development committee recommended

training for the whole faulty on scoring and using professional development days to score, and the budget committee ensured enough dollars were available. The council then approved the plans.

> ***"We quickly learned how important the committee structure is. The council cannot do it all."*** Elementary teacher on council.

Working committees. Both communication and opportunities for participation and input are crucial to a smooth functioning committee structure and council. Schools vary in how committee members are selected and whether every teacher is expected to participate. In some schools the principal assigns teachers to committees, in some the council assigns teachers, and in others teachers volunteer. In some schools, committee membership is determined or constrained by roles; for example, the curriculum committee might consist of a teacher from each grade level, subject area, or team. When personal preferences are taken into account as well as the need to balance representation across the school, committees are much more likely to function well. In most schools, parents choose the committees they wish to serve on. Both parents and teachers are far more likely to volunteer for the extracurricular committee than any other.

Two-way communication. Effective communication requires clear two-way channels between each committee and the larger school community, as well as with other committees and the council. Publicizing regular meeting times and agendas well in advance is one helpful strategy. Communication seems most effective when it is built into the way the committees are structured; for example, having different segments of the school (grades, teams, subjects) represented on each committee, thus ensuring that the needs of each part of the school are heard from and reported back to. Even with a powerful structure, however, participation still ultimately rests with individuals.

> ***"[Teachers] unhappy with council decisions are those who did not take the time to express their opinions."*** Middle school teacher.

Clear communication also presumes some shared set of understandings and operating assumptions. Among teachers and between teachers and parents there can be very different conceptions of what contributes to student learning. Even when parents and teachers are active committee members, communication is not assured, especially when teachers do not feel confident in their abilities to understand and explain the changes.

> ***"We have parents on the curriculum committee and they are perplexed. They want to know why we want to buy trade books instead of basals and I am having a hard time selling them. They want to go with what they know."*** Elementary teacher on council.

Effective communication with the larger community of parents poses an even greater challenge. Some councils send the minutes of every meeting to all parents as

well as periodic newsletters. Some schools are taking very creative steps to encourage more parents to participate and to communicate more effectively beyond the school. In one school, at the suggestion of a parent council member, some council meetings are now held in the neighborhoods where the students live instead of all at the school.

> ***"I am personally working on changing the philosophy that the parent must come to the school [to be involved]."*** Middle school parent on council.

Clearly, school size and structure influence communication; small schools can more easily bring the entire faculty together to discuss issues. On the other hand, small faculties can mean more work for fewer people. An elementary school with 20 teachers had 10 committees. According to the principal, "*After one year on site-based it became clear that people were spread way too thin and the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing.*" So the council reduced the number of committees to three: curriculum, budget, and staff development. They gave top priority to the curriculum committee, which included a representative from each of the five teacher teams, with the budget and staff development committees designated to play supporting roles.

An Interconnected Committee and Communication System

One middle school has established a committee structure that builds in not only a communication network, but also a schedule that provides time for teachers to gather information, develop curriculum, participate in professional development, and work with individual students.

Faculty are organized into six instructional teams, each with a team leader. Every committee includes one member from all six teams, as well as parents and other staff, which ensures a two-way flow of information between each team and each committee. Every subject area has a lead teacher who, together with parents and other staff, form the curriculum team, facilitating communication with each subject area committee ,which in turn consists of all subject area teachers. So, for example, the math committee consists of the math teachers from each of the six teaching teams, three parents and two elective teachers. In addition, there is an overarching coordinating committee made up of a teacher representative from every other committee. Its function is to ensure communication across all the committees and make final decisions about recommendations to the council.

Under this system--which is easier to use than describe--everyone knows what every committee is doing, so the council can operate efficiently. To build in checks and balances, and to allay parent council members fears that all important decisions are made by the coordinating committee and not the council, it is council policy that a teacher cannot sit on both the coordinating committee and the council.

Site leadership. The principal is a crucial player in setting up a well-functioning committee structure. Creating a shared sense of mission grounded in student learning and working with the council to ensure that teachers have the time to gather information are essential. Councils too can play a key role in setting up effective committees and spreading the workload. Some councils designate the principal to assign each faculty member to a committee; other councils have established committee participation as one criterion for recommending new hires.

Barriers to Effective Councils

Tendency to Micromanage. The establishment of an effective council with a supporting committee structure is extremely difficult, and takes several years to develop. School councils, like school boards, tend to micromanage, trying to control many decisions that are more appropriately--and more efficiently--made by others. Councils, again like school boards, have a difficult time focusing on broad policies and instead find themselves enmeshed in time-consuming debates over a host of issues only marginally related to student learning. When councils spend hours on cheerleader selection, candy sales, placements of clocks in the building and individual complaints, they are unlikely to get around to issues of teaching and learning--or have any energy left if they do.

> ***"People say the council is like a kangaroo court for all kinds of problems, like a grievance board. Over the course of three years our faculty has moved from feeling that's what we were seeing to now seeing the council as an umbrella for all the different committees."*** Elementary teacher.

School staff and parents are also discouraged by councils that frequently overturn committee recommendations, especially without adequate explanation beyond claims of "knowing better." Broad participation in decision making is unlikely to happen without the kind of leadership that can bring people together around a shared mission and mediate conflicts. Lack of clear communication on all sides--among school staff and with parents--is a common problem. Schools organized with teams of teachers already have a structure that can be built on in establishing committees and communication.

Limited Parent Involvement. Councils and committees suffer from too little parent involvement--both in numbers and in voice--which not only means little input from parents but also means that parents are more likely to be critical of decisions that result because they have not been a part of the process. One parent council member described how important it has been to her to spend time in the school, to really understand the issues she is asked to make decisions about. For example, she did not support primary teachers' request to cut doors through the wall between rooms until she spent a day at the school and saw how much time was lost by having students use the hallway. In another school a parent council member, concerned about how students

were grouped in the primary program, proposed a pilot study that would compare two different ways of grouping students.

When parents are involved, they play very different roles on committees and councils, depending on their own background, comfort level, and purpose for involvement. Parents are accustomed to the role of advocate for their children, not to the role of policy maker on a site council or planner on a committee. Like teachers accustomed to autonomy and isolation, parents are learning how to play new collaborative schoolwide roles. The transition is not easy, especially when all parties bring histories of conflict and defensiveness.

Insufficient Time. Many teachers are reticent to put in the extra time required by extensive committee or council work. Most teachers already feel extra time pressure from the changes they are being asked to make in their classrooms. Even some teachers who actively participate on site councils are not convinced that the trade-off of time is worth it. The more effectively the council functions, the less likely teachers are to feel this way. When council and committee meetings consume considerable time and do not result in decisions viewed as important and widely supported, teachers are more likely to judge the whole process not worth the time.

> *"They put me in there to teach and this eats up all my time."* Elementary teacher on council.

Council members also complain that requests from the state and from their district often have timelines that do not take into account the need to go through a time-consuming committee and council decision process. A decision-making process by-passed under time pressure quickly loses credibility.

Insufficient Information. The ultimate purpose of SBDM is to make decisions that will increase student learning. To do this requires sound information about how students are currently performing and about what actions will increase that performance. KIRIS* is not designed to play this role. KIRIS results provide only a broad picture of school performance, based on one grade level, and are not even available until well into the following school year. Hence, they are not a source for specific guidance on what should be changed or on knowing whether changes have been effective.

An increase or decrease in scores from one year to the next is not necessarily viewed as information about the effectiveness of new practices. Many teachers believe that they can make improvements that are not reflected in the KIRIS scores for a host of reasons, including very different students from one year to the next--in ability, in motivation, and in length of time in the school , and different classroom experiences in the grade levels tested.

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* Kentucky Instructional Results and Information System

Changes in Classroom Practices

New Practices

Teachers are asking students to do more writing, to explain their answers orally and in writing, to work in teams, and to perform tasks similar to those in KIRIS. Teachers are also relying less on page by page use of textbooks, using textbooks, trade books, and other materials as resources when needed. These changes inside classrooms may result from council actions or they may result from leadership and access to professional development that occur whether or not there is a council. But whichever route has led to new curriculum, instruction, and classroom organization, the changes are similar and reflect the kinds of questions and performances that are asked of students on the new KIRIS assessments.

> ***"When I give tests to see if students understand, they are different. I used to ask questions about bar graphs. Now I have them create a bar graph and answer open ended questions about it."*** Middle school teacher.

Changes in instructional practices include:

- More and lengthier writing
- More hands-on activities
- Practice responding to open-ended questions
- Practice in performance events
- Using textbooks as a reference
- Less teacher talk
- Asking students to explain answers fully
- More connections across subjects
- Discussion of meaning of performance levels

Schools also exhibit changes in organization, such as adding the fourth grade to the primary program, establishing teams in the intermediate and middle grades, and creating more flexible schedules that allow some time for teachers to work together. Schools have even created rooms where a variety of centers are set up for students to practice different performance events.

Sources for New Knowledge

Where changes occur across more than one or two teachers, there is usually evidence of strong leadership from the principal as well as access to a variety of sources of new knowledge that go well beyond standard workshop presentations. Principals encourage teachers to take advantage of professional development opportunities and facilitate schedule changes that allow teachers to do so. Teachers attend workshops, institutes, and conferences, often in teams, and visit other schools to observe effective approaches. Often, these teachers share what they have learned with their colleagues by giving mini-workshops tailored to their needs and interests, although time is usually a limiting factor.

> ***"Our best staff development has been led by our own people based on personal experience and personal training."*** Elementary teacher.

Teachers are also acquiring new knowledge from their own hands-on experiences in creating and scoring portfolios and performance events, and from creating new curriculum and materials. Schools that participate in state or national programs that network schools together, such as the National Alliance for Restructuring in Education or the National Science Foundation's PRISM, also provide a rich source of new knowledge. Participating on school councils and committees is also viewed as a valuable source of input for some.

> ***"Being on the council has really helped me as a teacher because the committees tell me what is going on in the school was a whole. I know more what is expected of us."*** Middle school teacher on council.

Parents have fewer opportunities to learn about the changes embodied in KERA. Some schools have put out special efforts to share their knowledge with parents. For example, one school council attracted over 100 parents (in a school with over 500 students) by sponsoring a KERA "expo" where teachers offered demonstrations of all the aspects of KERA at different stations and parents rotated through. Another council led parents attending the parent-teacher organization meeting through a performance event. Occasionally, parents accompany teachers on visits to other schools. But generally parents and administrators have even fewer opportunities to learn than teachers.

Barriers to New Ways

Even in schools with major changes in curriculum and instruction, not all teachers have changed their practices. Some genuinely believe that their traditional methods are effective; others are resistant to any change. Even those predisposed to improve their practices struggle with understanding what is expected and what to do to meet those expectations.

Teachers hear a variety of messages from various trainers and vendors, colleagues, and even from local and state administrators, including statements that they should no longer focus on skills or "we don't do it that way anymore." One teacher described secretly keeping a checklist of skills for each student in her desk "even though we are not supposed to." The learning outcomes and curriculum frameworks clearly incorporate all the basic skills, yet the emphasis on understanding concepts and processes leaves some teachers--and parents--worried about how and when basic skills are to be taught.

> ***"You have to use a lot of the stuff out of KERA but a lot of the old stuff is good and you have to figure out the blend."*** Elementary teacher.

Although it takes considerable skill and knowledge, some teachers are able to embed learning and practicing skills systematically in a variety of challenging activities that require their application. These teachers figure out ways to find a balance, preserving what has worked well in the past with what is now known about teaching for understanding .

> ***"I do specific skills but I do it as a mini-lesson instead of lecture. Not memorize, memorize, memorize."*** Elementary teacher.

KIRIS has clearly influenced classroom practices in general, but it is not designed to provide feedback at a level that can inform teachers--or councils--about which particular choices of activities and strategies are or are not effective. Teachers worry about whether they are doing what is expected of them, and how to tell.

> ***"The part that is scary is not really knowing for sure if you are doing the right thing ."*** Elementary teacher on council.

The Kentucky Department of Education is in the process of creating content standards and developing course outlines that together are intended to provide more specific guidance than the curriculum frameworks. As more professional development opportunities become available for teachers to understand how they are expected to change, they will feel more confident about changing their practices. And as teachers learn more, they will be better able to explain changes to parents. It is hard for teachers who are uncertain to convince parents, who become fearful when nothing about school looks familiar to them. Parents who no longer see letter grades, workbooks, textbooks, or familiar test scores wonder what is going on. Those who themselves, and whose children, have been successful in the past are even less likely to support changes that are confusing to them.

> ***"They give my kids homework I don't understand. I don't know how to help."*** Elementary parent.

District Role

Although the district role was not a major focus in this year's research, several themes were evident. Representing a major shift in authority to the school site, SBDM still has not resulted in widespread conflict between councils and local boards. Although the Kentucky School Boards Association continues to press the legislature to restore approval authority to local boards, few examples of direct conflict have surfaced. Judging from the handful of cases brought to the attention of the Office of Education Accountability, districts do not generally seem to actively block school council formation and functioning. There are exceptions, but they appear to be small in number. Some council members express reluctance to directly confront their local boards, not wanting to "bite the hand that feeds us." Others point out that their hands are still tied by seniority and transfer policies.

> ***"[Schools] are not getting real authority if players can be traded without their consent."*** Elementary parent on council.

The bigger problem is that district staff are not in a position to provide much help to schools. They may not be able to answer school councils' questions about what is legal and what is not, or may inadvertently answer them incorrectly. Schools may receive insufficient budget information not because the district is withholding it, but because the district does not maintain adequate and timely data.

Issues are beginning to arise that will test more boundaries between school and district authority. What happens when the district needs to place a districtwide program , such as one for disabled students, at a school and the school council does not want it? What happens when a school council wants to decide when it will schedule professional development days and the district, for reasons of transportation costs and consistency, selects the dates? And, ultimately, how different can schools become given the often high mobility rate of students within a district? These tensions between the efficiencies of consistency and meeting unique needs, along with the NIMBY factor, will continue to arise and be worked out over time as all parties make judgments about what is in the best interest of students.

CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

Implementing SBDM continues to reflect significant progress. Although the 1993-94 school year did not result in a large increase in the numbers of schools forming councils, those schools with councils already in place began to take on a wider range of issues and a more complicated array of decisions. In schools where councils have delved into the essence of KERA--changing what happens in classrooms--they have strong leadership and strong committee structures that undergird council operations. They also have access to a variety of sources of new knowledge and professional development as well as effective internal and external communication channels.

Characteristics of Effective School Councils

- Leadership that focuses attention on student learning.
- A role of setting policy, coordinating, and approving recommendations.
- A dynamic and interconnected committee structure.
- A communication network inside and outside the school.
- Strong parent representation on committees.
- Access to new knowledge and professional development.

However, the mere presence of a site council does not ensure change, particularly where the principal calls all the shots. Conversely, schools can make major improvements in curriculum and instruction without a school council, when strong leadership is present. But without a school council, the possibility of significant improvement is beyond the control of teachers and parents. Given the critical role of site leadership, the fact that councils have the authority to hire principals when vacancies occur is crucial.

Councils also guarantee that the parent community will have a voice in the process of change, even if it is not yet a loud voice. Moreover, a council can ensure that there is ownership of an agenda for change that goes beyond the principal, so that inevitable turnover in principals does not halt progress. Finally, when a council and its committees function effectively, the council becomes a powerful vehicle for rallying faculty and parents around improvement goals. School councils cannot alone bring about school transformation, but without them such change is less likely to occur.

Strengthening Site Leadership

In schools where councils are operating well, and beginning to tackle the hard issues of change in curriculum and instruction, teachers and parents operate in committees that do the legwork, while the council focuses on setting direction, and policy, and approving or rejecting recommendations. Such smooth functioning does not happen without a site leader who can inspire teachers, who is sensitive to individual strengths and weaknesses, including peoples' abilities to work together, and who can bring everyone into the process, mediating disputes as necessary.

These are a very different set of leadership skills than those that education administrators are exposed to in university training or on the job. Administrators are

trained more to manage buildings than to lead and inspire teachers. They are certainly not professionally trained to lead a process of collaborative decision making and organizational transformation--a task that is particularly difficult in schools where teachers are accustomed to working in isolation and parents are accustomed to maintaining their distance. The authority of councils to select the principal may change the kinds of people in these roles, but the number of openings far exceeds the pool of applicants with these new leadership skills. Increasing the number of strong school leaders will require transforming administrator preparation and licensing, as well as creating more and different professional growth opportunities, including support and assistance, to those already on the job.

Bridging the Old and the New

Teachers and parents share concerns about KERA. Even among teachers who have made substantial changes in their classrooms, questions and concerns remain about what is expected, and what is best for students. What do the assessment scores mean? How can I tell how well my students/my child is doing? How does my child compare to others? These are reasonable questions that teachers and parents ask in every school across the country.

Importantly, the focus of most--although not the loudest--conversation about KERA is about best practice, not about personal values, and reflects genuine feelings of confusion and disagreement. These are complicated issues of real educational substance that have rarely been debated publicly in the past. Both confusion and differences in beliefs can be resolved by providing opportunities for everyone--teachers, administrators, parents--to learn more about and discuss expectations for students. They could also undermine progress if left to fester.

Negative comments from a single teacher can have a major influence on an entire community's view of a school. Unfounded criticisms from a vocal parent can have a similarly devastating effect.

> ***"The real support for KERA has to come from parents, from a community that values it. If the councils can't help build that community of support, where will it come from?"*** Regional Service Center staff.

No one believes that basic skills are unimportant. No one believes that children can get by without knowing how to multiply two-digit numbers or how to spell. No one believes that children do not need to understand concepts and apply them. Differences among people concern how and when these skills and concepts are taught.
And the results orientation of KERA actually allows for considerable variation. The danger lies in extreme positions which, by their extreme nature, offend those who disagree. Both teachers and parents need guidance to help connect the new to the old--to build the same kinds of bridges that students need between what they already know and what they are expected to learn.

Building Bridges from Old to New

Faculty in one elementary school described how they began an ungraded primary program in their school five years ago, before KERA. Recognizing that many of the new practices would be unfamiliar and potentially upsetting to parents--and to some teachers--the faculty decided to introduce new practices one at a time without dropping the old practices immediately. For example, they created narrative report cards but did not eliminate letter grades until parents were used to the new kind of reporting. They added trade books and used the textbook as a resource but did not eliminate basal readers right away. Each change was introduced gradually, side by side with previous practice, until it became familiar.

Finding the Time to Learn

Opportunities to learn new ways of educating children require time. Teachers cannot learn new ways of teaching during a mere handful of days dedicated to professional development. Learning new ways of organizing instruction, developing new curricula, creating new measures of student progress, as well as taking on new roles as planners and decision makers need to be built into the workday. It takes time to acquire new knowledge, to practice, and to learn through debate and discussion. Thus, schools that have made significant changes in their instructional program usually have extra funding from special programs that allow smaller classes and flexible schedules freeing up teachers to learn and work together on an ongoing basis.

> ***"We have to look at some serious changes in school structure and time."***
> Regional Service Center staff.

Because teachers are the primary source of information for parents about curriculum and instruction, teachers' understanding of what is expected and how to do it is crucial, not only for changing classroom practices but also as the groundwork for building public support. Opportunities for parents and educators to learn about and discuss expectations for teaching and learning take time. Deeply held beliefs do not change quickly.

> ***"It takes teachers three years in primary to feel like they can give good answers to parents--they have to start feeling comfortable first."***
> Elementary teacher.

Without open debate, differences, whether from ignorance or disagreement, will be destructive to schools and therefore to student learning. Councils have an important role to play here, in facilitating discussions among school staff and in creating communication plans and opportunities for parents to learn. In the absence of new knowledge gained through direct experience, people naturally hold on to what they already know and believe.

Surviving the Transition

KERA asks for enormous change from everyone. Teachers are unaccustomed to collaboration and schoolwide decision making; parents are unaccustomed to roles beyond advocating for their own children; and principals have not been in the business of building a community. Central office staff and Kentucky Department of Education staff are expected to have all the answers, but they, too, are figuring out what KERA means for them, as well as for those in schools.

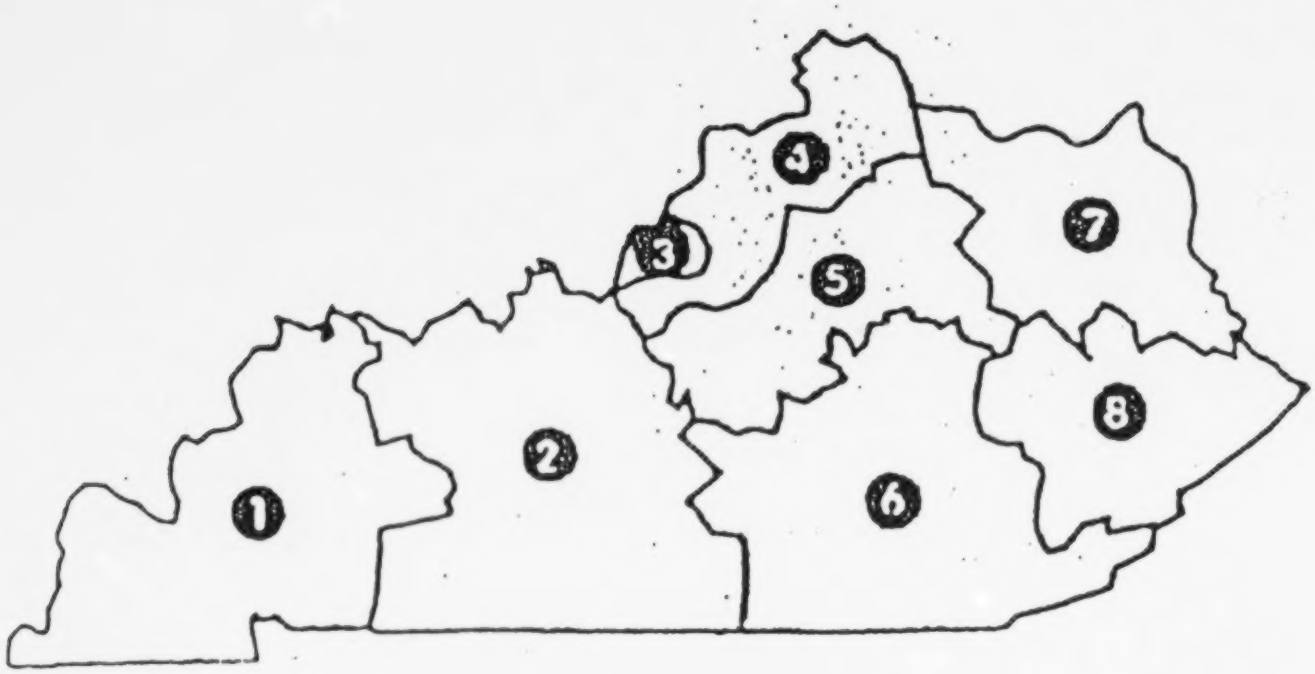
> ***"It's hard to find out what to do. The Department of Education is learning also."*** Middle school teacher.

Any change is uncomfortable. But change surrounded by misunderstanding, lack of knowledge, and uncertainty is particularly stressful. Yet a reform as complex and sweeping as KERA by its very nature increases uncertainty and confusion during its early phases. It requires time for everyone to learn, to reach new understandings, and to continue to make needed adjustments that permit each school to create learning environments appropriate to their needs. These are problems that can be solved, and school councils can help by identifying where more information and knowledge are needed for their school staff and for the larger school community.

The greatest threat to KERA's potential to increase students' learning lies in the tension between the need to view reform as developmental and dynamic--with everyone learning along the way--and the pressure to judge every step along the way and to demonstrate results prematurely in order to maintain legislative support. The risk is that positions will solidify; people will be for or against reform. Yet virtually no one wants to return to the education system before KERA.

Important pieces of KERA are still being put into place. The assessment system is evolving; curriculum guidance is still developing; schools are taking more responsibility for professional development. In many ways, 1996 will mark the real beginning of KERA--the first point at which all the key pieces are launched. Much of the current discussion about KERA is focused on important issues of educational substance, not issues of personal values, although the latter receive the most publicity. As long as the debate focuses on substance, where the will exists, differences can be accommodated. This is the real groundwork for profound change.

REGIONAL SERVICE CENTERS



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